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Somerville counts on wonks-in-training for budget overhaul

BY ROBERT PREER

It was an unlikely scene last fall, as 60 students from a graduate course on budgeting at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government descended on Somerville City Hall and its departmental outposts. Divided into teams of four or five, students sat with firefighters at their station houses and hopped on trucks when calls came in. Some were at the elbows of election officials at polling places on November 2. Others sat with senior police officers going over arrest procedures.

This curious collaboration—all the more striking because of Harvard's rarified reputation and Somerville's sometimes unsavory past—was designed to introduce to the city a new form of financial management known as activity-based budgeting. The student teams were undertaking an exercise known as activity mapping—trying to determine exactly what municipal departments do and how they do it. The information would be used in a new budgeting process meant to direct resources where they are most needed, not just where they've always gone.

"They are a very energetic group of kids," says Fire Chief Kevin Kelleher. "After our first meeting, I came into my office the next day and had five different e-mails from them."

The project came about as a result of a seminar the Kennedy School held more than a year ago for new mayors



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not just to share our riches with them, but to
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from around the country. Professor Linda Bilmes spoke about activity-based budgeting to the group, which included Somerville's Joseph Curtatone. The alderman who had just been elected mayor was so fascinated that he followed Bilmes to her next class. After subsequent talks, the two hit upon the plan to use her students to bring activity-based budgeting to Somerville.

Activity-based budgeting contrasts sharply with the standard line-item method, which typically starts with last year's numbers and goes up or down slightly, depending on projected revenue. Activity-based budgeting starts by identifying functions that organizations perform, then breaking out their cost. For example, if a city picks up roadkill, there are the salary and benefits costs of the employees who do the scooping up, their supervisors, the expense of disposal of the carcasses, plus the cost of vehicles, insurance, fuel, shovels, and so on. When the functions and their costs are determined, more thoughtful choices can be made about how to spend money.

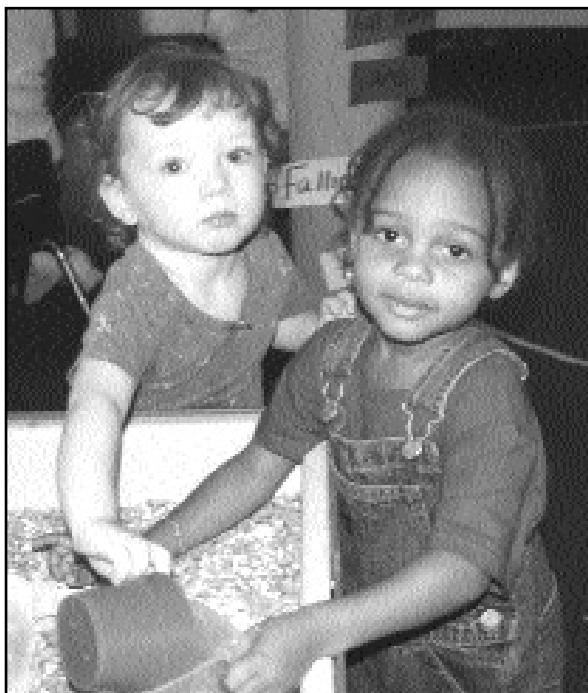
"It gives you a different way of thinking about manag-



Linda Bilmes and Mayor Joseph Curtatone: unlikely allies for budget reform.

ing a city," says Bilmes. "It can be a powerful tool."

The first step is to dissect the functions of government and figure out exactly what departments do. This is a very labor-intensive process, which was where the Harvard students came in. To encourage the 97 students in the class to



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participate, Bilmes offered them a choice: Commit to going to Somerville once or twice a week or write a term paper. It was, for many students, a no-brainer.

"I had figured maybe 10 or 15 would show up," says Bilmes. "We had 60. It was overwhelming."

The project did not cost Somerville a dime. The students' labor was free, and a grant from the Kennedy School's Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston covered the cost of the students' transportation.

Curtatone says the students' work has been exemplary, and he is confident his administration will be able to deliver an activity-based budget to the Board of Aldermen in the spring for the next fiscal year.

It helped that the mayor gave strong signals to officials in his administration to cooperate with the students. "It was one of the criteria for being one of my department heads," says Curtatone.

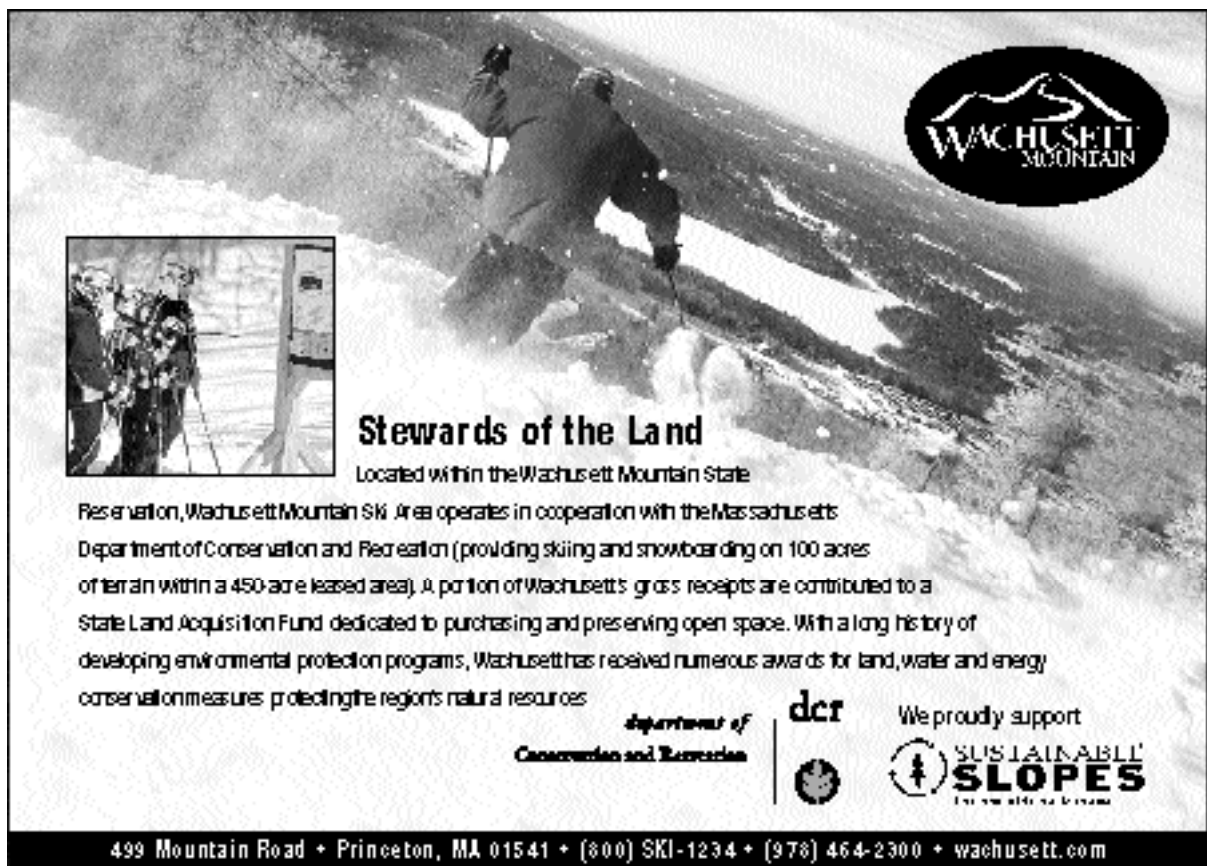
Harvard officials are proud of their students' work and confident they learned plenty on their field trips to Somerville. "You can't give A's to everyone necessarily," says Brendan Dallas, Bilmes's teaching assistant. But "we have 60 students, and we haven't had a single complaint."

"It was a very positive experience," says Dan Black, 27, who was assigned to the police department. "They worked well with us. We really like these guys."

The department heads, in turn, got help from students with plenty of life experience. Most of those at the Kennedy School are mid-career professionals who have spent quality time outside the cloistered walls of academia. The budgeting class included former teachers, doctors, accountants, and Peace Corps volunteers. Some of them had even spent time in municipal government.

Not every city in Massachusetts can find 60 graduate students to overhaul their finances for free, but the Bay State's many colleges and universities should not be overlooked as resources, says Curtatone, who has tapped into the Kennedy School in other ways. Charles Euchner, the former executive director of the Rappaport Institute, served on Curtatone's transition team and got the Somerville mayor hooked on CitiStat, a system of tracking delivery of municipal services developed by the city of Baltimore, which Curtatone wants to adapt for his city.

"Mayors should take advantage of these great institutions," says Curtatone. ■



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